DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 443 416 IR 020 330

AUTHOR	Arquette, Cecile M.; Horton, Julie
TITLE	The Influence of Current Television Programing on the Maintenance of Female Gender Identity.
PUB DATE	2000-04-24
NOTE	16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 24-28, 2000).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Audience Response; *Females; High School Students; High Schools; Males; *Mass Media Role; Programming (Broadcast); *Role Perception; Sex Bias; *Sex Stereotypes; *Television Viewing

ABSTRACT

Over the years, it has been shown that television has the tendency to use stereotypical gender imagery, and despite the continuing trend toward political correctness, the same types of gender bias are still very common today. Because of this tendency for bias, television programming continues to be an area of concern, especially in light of the number of hours of television people will watch throughout their lives. This research focuses on high school aged girls and their viewing choices, and the effects of such preferences on the formation and maintenance of their gender roles. A survey, distributed to 40 male and 37 female high school students, asked two questions: "What is your favorite program and why?" and "What is your favorite character and why?" Research focused on teen story-line shows--such as "Dawson's Creek," "Felicity," "Party of Five," and "Seventh Heaven"--because this was the only category chosen exclusively by female survey respondents. (Contains 22 references.) (AEF)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 443 416

The Influence of Current Television Programing on the Maintenance of Female Gender Identity

Cecile M. Arquette and Julie Horton

Presented at AERA, New Orleans
April 24th, 2000

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
  Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

C.M. Arquette

1

IR020330

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Introduction

Over the years, it has been shown that television has the tendency to use stereotypical gender imagery, and despite the continuing trend toward political correctness, the same types of gender bias are still very common today (Signorielli and Bacue, 1999). Because of this tendency for bias, television programming continues to be an area of concern especially in light of the number of hours of television people will watch throughout their lives. With the average American spending the equivalent of two months out of every year watching t.v., this then translates into one fourth of our waking hours passively in-taking the images of television (Hazen and Winokur, 1997).Children spend more time watching TV than they do in the classroom. (Graddol & Swann, 1989). "As their gender identity is being formed, American children and teens view an average of more than 14,000 sexual references and innuendoes on television each year (De Gaetano and Bander, 1996, p. 116). This statistic led the authors to wonder how so many hours in front of the television might impact the development and maintenance of children's developing gender identity.

For the purpose of this paper, our research focuses specifically on high school aged girls and their viewing choices, and the effects of such preferences on the maintenance and formation of their gender roles.

Literature Review

The way we learn our role and "place" in society depends on the

society in which our lives are embedded (Cole, 1996; Gee, 1990; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1998). One powerful source for the development of cultural norms today in the United States is television programing. As Sinorielli and Bacue (1999) put it, "Television's role in society is one of common storyteller-it is the mainstream of our popular culture" (p. 528). They go on to discuss that as a result of this role, what we see on television influences what people think in regards to how we should live and behave as women and men in our society.

The mass media does not function as a teacher because it is a commercial concern which operates for individual gain rather then social good (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998). Because of its pervasiveness in our everyday lives, the power of television to influence the formation of gender identification should not be underestimated. Throughout our lives, from our youngest years into adulthood what we consume as television watchers are messages which both reinforce and reproduce our gender identities (Douglas, 1995; Sinorielli and Bacue, 1999; Wood, 1990).

DeGaetano and Bander (1996) point out that "Screen stereotypes present an unrealistic social context in which to develop an objective world view" (p. 120).Another study explored how "factual and fictional media portrayals may activate culturally shared racial and gender stereotypes and influence subsequent judgments involving member of stereotyped groups" (Murphy, 1998). In other words, depending on the exposure to either stereotypic or counter stereotypic viewpoints, those images may in

turn effect the interpretations of an unrelated event.

Indeed, with the increasing number of channels now available due to cable and satellite TV, competition for advertising dollars is fierce; as a result, producers need to develop shows that will appeal to the widest audience possible. In order to do so, television programs continue to perpetuate stereotypical images and it is our contention that television reinforces "appropriate" gender roles and strengthens traditional hegemonic attitudes.

The packaging of television gender roles

As one of the major sources of imagery and story-telling in our environment, how does television present gender identities and roles? Numerous studies have analyzed how the media portrays gender. Streicher (1974), for example, found that cartoons from this era were dominated by "active, noisy" male characters while females were seen less capable and usually, "needed to be rescued" (p. 415). While this study was done more than 25 years ago, the same types of characters can be seen today. An example is the Disney cartoon *Duck Tales* , featuring as it's three main characters two young males and their sister. The boys are admonished to take care of their little sister, who sports a pink bow and behaves helplessly. While it is true that these characters are just cartoon ducks, children can acquire stereotypical messages about "appropriate behavior" from an early age.

Stereotypical portrayals of men and women on television include

women being portrayed as dependent upon males, and men as independent individuals (Wood,1990). Signorielli (1991) found that men's roles tend to be authoritative while and many women are seen as incompetent and unable to function as authorities. Women are more often seen as the primary care givers, while men are given the role of the chief breadwinner. In television, women are less aggressive then men and tend to be preoccupied with domestic tasks (Miles,1975; Signorielli, 1991).when women are seen as working outside the home they are usually in traditional female occupations such as nurses, secretaries, waitresses and teachers.

Other studies have shown women to be under represented in television, in relation to their percentage of the total population; (Beck, 1978; DeFleur, 1964; Head, 1954; Signorielli, 1989) men, women and heterosexual relationships are portrayed stereo typically, women are often victimized and violence against them is normalized (Durkin 1985a; Wood, 1990).

While the accepted roles for men and women have changed some in the last three decades, this is not reflected in current programming and stereotypic gender images continue to be consistent in programming today (Browne 1998). Male characters continue to be utilized more often and placed in dominant roles while females are portrayed as shy, giggly, and not likely to be assertive. Browne contends that if certain types of behavior are assigned almost exclusively to one gender then, that behavior

may tend to be viewed as the acceptable norm and deviations from it may be seen as strange or odd.

The Study

In our review of the literature we found there to be little research concerning adolescent girls and the effect today's programing may be having in developing and maintaining their views about gender. We developed a survey to see if high school aged girls in our area tended to watch "female" programing.

The survey asked two questions: 1) What is your favorite program and why? 2) What is your favorite character and why?

We obtained permission to distribute the survey to students at a high school that had approximately 1600 students with a population comprised of 60% Hispanic, 25% Anglo, 5% African-American and 10% Other. The number of respondents to the survey included 40 males (53.2%), ages 14-18 and 37 females (46.8%), ages 14-19 for a total of 77. As we were looking specifically at gender-based preferences, we did not ask for the race of survey respondents. The specific age break down is as follows:

AGE	MALES	FEMALES	PERCENTAGE
14	1	3	5.2%
15	9	12	27.3%
16	13	8	27.3%
17	13	8	27.3%
18	5	4	11.6%
19	0	1	1.3%

Upon completion of the surveys, we coded them independently then met to coordinate the results. Since the interest of the researcher was the female survey respondents, the programs these participates indicated as their favorites were taped and viewed.

Tell me a story

We focused our attention on what we called teen story-line shows because this was the only category chosen exclusively by female survey respondents. We defined this category as programs which centered on young adults in fictional families, such as *Dawson's Creek, Felicity, Party of Five and Seventh Heaven.*

One 14 year old survey respondent chose *Dawson's Creek* as her favorite and said:

> No, it's not a chick show, I know guys who watch it too. So there. Even though we know the actors are twice the age of their characters and the scenery is completely different from our own, they sometimes deal with issues us teens need info. on.

Despite this assertion, we found that no males in our survey chose a Teen Story Line Show as their favorite. Why? As we watched these programs, it seemed as if an attempt was made to create scenarios which would appeal to teenagers, as the above respondent noted. When we sampled some episodes we found programs which dealt with the dramas of growing up, as served up by television writers: Relationship mix-ups, moral dilemmas, parental infidelity, divorce and reckless behavior. As

respondents said: "...really shows the problems and events that teens encounter as teenagers", "...I can kind of relate to their problems and help me think about mine" and "...because it's interesting and has to do with teens."

But if these programs are supposed to address such issues, why don't boys seem interested in them? One explanation for the clear gender split is that program preferences selected by teenagers simply reflect years of input form many arenas: Print and television advertising, sex-differentiated roles in the home, school, the predominance of males in certain fields and even the text books they have been reading for years. If choices viewers make as teenagers is a reflection of the hegemonic messages they have been exposed to throughout their lives, it would make sense that preferences reflect such a background. Indeed, by the time a child reaches high school, viewing habits are probably set and program choice simply enforces these established preferences.

Program content

Good girls and bad

When we sat down to watch several hours of the top choices of the respondents, *Dawson's Creek, Felicity, Party of Five and Seventh Heaven,* several things caught our attention right away. All of the programs we watched seemed to focus on some sort of moral. There was often a "good" character featured who was kind and supportive of a "character in some kind of trouble." For example, on one episode of *Party of Five* featured a

male college freshman who tried to get through his first semester the easy way. Taking supposedly easy classes and cheating on a prerequisite test. His wise, understanding high school senior girlfriend is there to be supportive when he fails, but also gently shows him the error of his ways.

In the same episode, the cheating theme continued with another featured character being caught plagiarizing a portion of her dissertation. But it really wasn't her fault, because she suffered from depression and didn't realize she had lifted an entire section of a book and typed it word for word into her own work. Throughout, her concerned husband is there, worried about the depression she hid from him and ready to march down to the university to defend her.

These two subplots treat the female characters very differently. One is horrified to find her boyfriend paid someone to take a test for him, the other is astonished to find she "accidentally" copied something into her research. Yet for these differences, both characters are are really stereotypical female roles. One nurturing and moral, the other depressed and incapable.

Another example of the archetypal "good" girl with morals is the minister's junior high school aged daughter in *Seventh Heaven* . In one episode we watched, she wanted her dad to intervene when a male friend of hers is busted for drug possession. In this same episode, we see her mother being supportive and motherly as she takes care of the family's twin infants.

Its a white perfect world

Another element of fantasy which is prevalent in the programing favored by our female respondents is the whiteness and physically perfection of the featured characters. When we looked around the high school where we did our survey, while many of the students were attractive, most looked like "normal", gawky teenagers. Additionally, as the survey was done in a South-Western city, a large segment of the school population was Mexican American. Yet but none of these popular shows featured Chicanas. *Felicity* did have a token African American couple, one Latino character and an eccentric gay man all of whom appeared from time to time on the shows we watched. But the other programs didn't even have people of color waking around in the background.

The unreal becomes real

The unreality of all of the programs we watched was striking. Almost none of the people who populate these shows seem to work, yet they all live in very large beautifully decorated spaces. While the minister in *Seventh Heaven* does have a job, few real ministers could support a large family in the style displayed on the program. The title character in *Felicity* works in a coffee shop, yet how could a waitress job provide her trendy clothes, a stylishly furnished apartment *and* pay for her college tuition?

Ultimately some of the most unreal aspects of all of the programs we reviewed revolved around the very grown-up sexual relationships the

featured teen-aged characters had. Sexuality permeated these shows, from overt make-out scenes to pregnancy (conveniently terminated in a miscarriage) to older boys or men with younger women. The female characters in all the shows we watched sought out contact from the opposite sex. While this is actually quite a normal activity for teenagers, the perfection of the television girls and their success with physically perfect boys does not reflect real life.

Discussion

Wood (1990) points out three important factors about the media in general as it pertains to gender stereotyping. First the media reflects the cultural values and ideals about gender. Second, media defines what is normal and tends to reproduce "normal" cultural views. Finally, mass media functions as a gatekeeper of information and images. What effect do all these stereo typical images have on a child of either sex? Durkin notes that "A five year old boy and a thirteen year old girl cannot be assumed to attend to and interpret female beauty advertisements in exactly the same way, and both may perceive them differently from adult viewers" (Durkin, 1985b, 205). While Durkin is referring to a beauty advertisement, but the same could be true regardless of the material being viewed. The consequences of being fed a steady diet of idealized gender images may prevent individuals from stepping outside the boundaries that the media portrays as female and male roles (Wood, 1990).

Our female respondents did not seem to like programs or characters

for what would be considered stereotypical reasons. Or did they? Perhaps we need to redefine what is "stereotypical" in regards to female viewers. While it appears that the girls in this survey were more interested in characters' personalities and the positive messages of programming, by aiming such programming at females, producers are reproducing the stereotype of the caring, intuitive woman-along with, of course the more traditional sexually attractive woman.

Conclusion

The endless images viewed over the hours and hours of television watching done by the typical child have an influence in the classroom and beyond. How students view themselves and others are not limited to children but also to the adults children eventually become. Concerned teachers, researchers, and parents must go beyond simply viewing televised gender images critically, we need to actively explore curricula which encompasses critical media viewing skill. It is vital that the community and educators take an active stance in how children perceive what they watch, and how it relates to their own self image.

If children were to be exposed to counter-hegemonic TV images, they could beginning to look at the roles men and women in our society in a different light. By giving young viewers the opportunity to see a variety of realistic situations and female characters who go beyond stereotypical roles, our girls could then see themselves in unlimited roles.

References

Beck, K. (1978). Television and the older woman. *Television Quarterly, 15,* 47-49.

Browne, B.A. (1998). Gender stereotypes in advertising on children's television in the 1990s: A cross-national analysis. *Journal of Advertising* 27 (1), 83-96.

Cole, M. (1996). *Cultural psychology: A once and future discipline.* Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

DeFleur, M. (1964). Occupational roles as portrayed on television. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 28,* 57-74.

DeGaetano, G. and Bander, K. (1996). *Screen smarts: A family guide to media literacy.* New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Douglas, S. J. (1995). *Where the girls are: Growing up female with the mass media.* New York: Times Books, Random House.

Durkin, K. (1985a). Television and sex role acquisition 1: Content. *British Journal of Social Psychology* 24, 101-113.

Durkin, K. (1985b). Television and sex role acquisition 2: Effects. *British Journal of Social Psychology* 24 191-210.

Gee, J. P. (1990). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses.* Bristol, PA: The Falmer Press.

Graddol, D. & Swann, J. (1989). *Gender Voices.* Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell Ltd.

Hazen, D. & Winokus, J. (1997). *We the media : A citizens' guide to*

fighting for media democracy. New York: New York Press.

Head, S. (1954). Content analysis of television drama programs. *Quarterly of film, radio and television, 9,* 175-194.

Miles, B. (1975). Channeling children: Sex stereotyping in prime-time TV. *Women on words and images, 1975* 23-29.

Murphy, S.T. (1998). The impact of factual versus fictional media portrayals on cultural stereotypes. Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 560 165-178.

Rogoff, B. (1990). *Apprenticeship in thinking: Cognitive development in social context.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Signorielli, N. (1989). Television and conceptions about sex roles: Maintaining conventionality and the status quo. *Sex roles, 21,* 341-360.

Signorielli, N. (1991). *A sourcebook on children and television.* New York: Greenwood Press.

Signorielli, N. and Bacue, A. (1999). Recognition and respect: a content analysis of prime-time television characters across three decades. *Sex Roles,* 40, (7/8) 527-544.

Streicher, H.W. (1974). The girls in the cartoons. Journal of Communication 24 125-129.

Steinberg, R. and Kincheloe, J. L. Introduction: No more secrets-kinderculture, information saturation, and the postmodern childhood. pp. 1-30. In R. Steinberg and J. L. Kincheloe, eds., *Kinder culture: The corporate construction of childhood.* Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1998). *The collected works of L. S. Vygotsky, Volume 5, Child psychology.* (J. M. Hall, Trans.). NY: Plenum Press.

Wood, J. T. (1990). *Gendered lives: Communication, gender and culture.* Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing.